

THE STORY OF A SHOOTING: RECOMMENDATIONS FOR MORE EFFECTIVE CRISIS COMMUNICATION

John R. Fisher, jfisher@nwmissouri.edu, Northwest Missouri State University

ABSTRACT

A crisis narrative is used to tell the story of a shooting at Northwest Missouri State University in Maryville, Missouri, United States. The story provides a learning experience for institutions as they seek best practices in handling crises. Although it appears that the university followed procedures correctly in dealing with this situation, questions linger as to whether administrators truly communicated effectively with students. Technology was used to warn students of potential danger, but not enough information was provided so students could deal on a personal level with the crisis. Face-to-face communication is important especially in a crisis to “soften” the blows of the situation.

1. INTRODUCTION

Shootings at Virginia Tech and Northern Illinois University have demonstrated the need for effective communications with students. At Virginia Tech students complained because the only news they received was an email sent out more than two hours after the initial killings. Earlier communication and action on the part of authorities might have averted some of the slayings.

“Untimely communication may lead to some individuals delaying or not taking appropriate precautions that could help avoid injury, illness, or death,” writes Chun (2009). On the other hand, the timely release of information may allow people at risk to take precautions that could prevent injury and save lives.

“Crises happen when least expected, are shocking and create a great deal of uncertainty for everyone concerned,” write Ulmer, Sellnow, and Seeger (2007, p. 18). Because crises are nonroutine events, they say, leaders should respond quickly, but using nonroutine responses that take into account the special situations of the crisis. Often the threat of a crisis is more perceptual than real, thus compounding the uncertainty of the situation. “Crisis communicators must communicate early and often following a crisis, regardless of whether or not they have critical information about the crisis” (Ulmer, Sellnow, and Seeger, 2007, p. 21). In a crisis situation, organizations shouldn’t increase the uncertainty of the crisis by misleading or distracting the public (p. 25).

While communicators should act to effectively reduce uncertainty, ambiguity may be something they can't avoid (Sellnow and Ulmer, 2004). Ambiguity is appropriate when all the facts aren't known. It is better to be accurate and admit not knowing than to have to correct false information later. Ambiguity lets stakeholders "create their own relevant meanings" in a crisis situation and helps "to heighten receiver attention" (p. 254).

Ulmer, Sellnow, and Seger (2007) make a number of recommendations for effectively communicating in a crisis situation. First, before the crisis the organization must develop relationships with stakeholders, both internal and external to the organization. During the crisis acknowledge these stakeholders as true and important partners in managing the situation. Effective crisis communication involves listening to stakeholders. In the crisis communicate early with stakeholders, acknowledge any uncertainty, and maintain contact with the stakeholders about current or future risks. Finally, provide the public information that they can use to make decisions about protecting themselves during the crisis.

While organizations can't always correctly predict a crisis and how it will play out, they can anticipate possible crisis situations. In a crisis it is important to act by responding in some way. The worse thing to do in a crisis, according to Holder (2004), is to say or do nothing. If the situation is negative, silence will lead to disaster. Holder (2004) indicates that the complex messages involved a crisis situation may require effective face-to-face communication. Face-to-face communications allows both verbal and nonverbal messages, with the nonverbal messages "softening" the blow of the crisis. "Face-to-face interaction also allows for a quicker cycle of acts and interacts to reduce uncertainty" (p. 54).

In the university setting Chun (2009) recommends a multi-layered communication approach that could reach as high a percentage of the constituents as possible in a crisis situation. He suggests universities use of a combination of text messaging, emails, siren systems with voice capability, digital displays, and emergency websites. The text messaging system that allows campus security to send a text alert (including instructions) to registered cell phone users who are on or off-campus. Other approaches include radio and television, hotline numbers, a "reverse-911" system, and even bull horns.

Some of the problems include getting people registered for text messaging and keeping them informed and educated about other emergency procedures. The problem is that the people at universities are constantly changing. Even at Virginia Tech only 25 percent of the people are registered. These numbers will decrease unless registration is mandatory, which university officials hesitate to require. Systems can also be knocked out because of severe weather situations that may be part of the crisis situation.

2. THE NARRATIVE

“Telling a story is a culturally typical response to a crisis,” writes Heath (2004, p. 168). Narrative gives meaning to a person’s world. Through narratives, they structure their experiences and actions. A narrative is an orderly way of presenting a view through a description of characters, actions, and settings. In telling the story of a crisis, one begins the narrative before the crisis, during the crisis, and after the crisis. Narrative, according to Heath (2004, p. 173), is “a perfect framework for understanding the past, knowing what is occurring in the present, and projecting action and events into the future.”

The story at Northwest Missouri State University begins in the aftermath of the Virginia Tech April 16, 2007 shooting where 32 people were killed and many others wounded by a lone gunman who turned his weapon on himself. Northwest reviewed its emergency response procedures and as a result expanded the Simplex voice warning system to include messages about an active shooter in addition to fire and tornado warnings. A security and emergency checklist was also placed in each classroom on campus with instructions to “shelter in place/lockdown” (Security and Emergency Checklist, updated 2008). Faculty and students are told to secure the immediate area by locking and barricading doors, turning off lights, closing blinds and blocking windows, turning off radios and TVs, keeping calm, quiet and out of sight, taking adequate cover behind desks, filing cabinets and keeping cell phones quiet unless communicating with authorities.

Late on Saturday, October 27, 2007, following a homecoming dance, shots were fired on the Northwest Missouri State University campus in Maryville, Missouri. Although it was not immediately clear how many shots were fired, it was later determined that five shots were fired from a small caliber weapon, three of which went into a parked car. No one was injured (Shots fired, 2007).

By the time campus security officers arrived at The Station, a conference and campus activity center, the shooters and most witnesses had fled. The few witnesses, who were still around indicated that the man who had fired the shots was not a student. Police put out an all points bulletin for two persons of interest, that they described as “two black males with dreadlocks who were both wearing green ‘hoodie’ sweatshirts at the time of the shooting.” One officer, who was later interviewed (April 20, 2009), indicated that police knew within five minutes that the shooter had left the campus.

Once police arrived, the campus wide alarm system was activated to make students and faculty aware of the incident (Shots fired, 2007). Officials said they put the school on lockdown as a precautionary measure. The campus-wide alarm system warned over loudspeakers in every building of a “shooter on campus.” Students, faculty and staff of were told to go to their rooms and lock their doors as a precaution until officers could check each of the thirteen residence halls and the other campus buildings. Finally, after officers from the state troopers, sheriff’s department, city police, and campus security had completed a room-by-room check in the residence halls, the lockdown was lifted. The lockdown lasted until about 6 a.m. The warning blared every few minutes for the six hours of the lockdown.

Campus officials held a press conference with the media soon after the shots were fired. At the press conference the media were told that gunshots were reported shortly before midnight Saturday in a parking lot near The

Station and that no one was arrested. Officers were looking for two men they described as persons of interest, but said they believed the men had left the campus. About 2 a.m. an email was sent out to all members of the campus community. For many students this was the first information they received other than what they could hear over the alarm system. Many other students didn't check their email until later next day (Interview, April 20, 2009).

Students who were off the campus were not permitted to return to their dorms, but had to find places to stay with friends. Police check points were set up and people of suspicion were stopped and questioned. One African American student said he felt blacks were purposely profiled and stopped.

In interviews (April 20, 2009), some students said the alarm was loud and annoying. Most of the approximately 2,000 students living on campus are freshmen. Many of the students stayed in their rooms, following directions as they had been instructed. However, it was impossible to go to sleep. Many of the students after a while got up and wandered the halls, but didn't leave the buildings. One student said, "We were scared, completely unaware of what was happening. We tried to talk to our RA (residence hall assistant), but she had barricaded herself in her room." Some students phoned campus safety to get updates. They shared this informal information with other students. Rumors abounded.

The next day university president, Dr. Dean Hubbard, issued a statement. "What happened was an altercation between a couple of people," Hubbard told the press. "Shots were fired as a result of the altercation. Northwest is still a safe campus and we are doing everything we can to figure out exactly what happened last night." Hubbard indicated that Northwest was ranked fourth nationally among safe college campuses. Students were offered counseling services if they needed help.

On Oct. 29, university officials confirmed that a person of interest had been arrested in conjunction with the shooting (Person of Interest, 2009). The individual was picked up on a warrant from another county. However, although the man was a witness, investigators determined he was not the shooter. The man who fired the shots has never been found.

A week later on November 6, Missouri State governor Matt Blunt issued a statement describing Northwest's crisis management plan as "invaluable" in the wake of a shots-fired incident that took place on campus. He cited a report authored by Director of Public Safety Mark James and Dr. Robert Stein, state commissioner of higher education. The men were co-chairs of Blunt's Campus Security Task Force, which was formed following the shootings at Virginia Tech in April.

"The co-chairs reported to me that Northwest Missouri State University had a solid crisis management plan, and its implementation proved invaluable," Blunt said. "Using their emergency operations plan, responders worked well together, warnings to members of the campus community were immediately relayed with specificity, and the campus population was referred to emergency instructions posted on buildings."

Blunt continued: "This incident is a reminder to all academic colleges and universities that they must maintain and review a current all-hazards crisis management plan. The Department of Public Safety and the Department of Higher Education are working collaboratively at designing ways to include higher education institutions in the recently developed Missouri Alert Network established by the Missouri School Boards' Association.... Overall, I am pleased the report indicates that members of Northwest Missouri State University and the surrounding community should be commended for their response to the existence of an active shooter on their campus. Fortunately no one was hurt, and the campus community was able to return to its normal operation in a reasonable time period."

Three months later on February 14, 2008, a gunman shot six people and wounded eighteen on the campus of Northern Illinois University in DeKalb, Illinois. The incident happened on the campus's Cole Hall at approximately 3:05 p.m. local time. The school placed the campus on lockdown; students and teachers were advised to head to a secure location, take cover, and avoid the scene and all buildings in the vicinity of the area.

Following that Northern Illinois University massacre, Northwest Missouri State University launched an emergency text-messaging system to increase the University's ability to communicate with students during times of crisis. Scott Walk, health and safety manager, said the program adds another layer to the University's emergency response plan.

"The goal for an emergency coordinator is to alert as many people in as short of a period of time as possible," Walk said. The text-messaging program is voluntary and is open to all Northwest students, faculty and staff. The alerts will cost only what cellular phone plans dictate for normal text messages. Walk emphasized text messages will be sent only in emergency situations. They could include University closings, an immediate threat/violence situation on campus, tornado, situations of an extreme nature and periodic testing. Messages will not be sent for advertisements, marketing or to communicate campus or community events.

Along with the text-messaging program, Walk reported the University has other emergency notification measures in place. The Simplex System sends audible alerts throughout campus buildings for weather and emergency situations. Additionally, e-mails will be sent and information about an emergency will be posted on the Northwest Web site. Additionally, radio stations will broadcast announcements in connection with alerts.

"It all goes back to redundancy," Walk said. "The more ways we have to communicate with staff and students in case of an emergency, the better."

3. CONCLUSIONS

After an evaluation, Northwest Missouri State University officials determined that their crisis procedures had worked well. In this 2007 shooting incident the university took immediate action to protect the lives of students. In addition, they contacted the media and sent emails to the university community. The crisis communication system worked as it was supposed to. The addition of the text-messaging system further developed the multi-layered communication approach recommended by Chun (2009).

However, given that police knew almost immediately that the suspects were no longer on campus and that the shots were fired as part of an altercation between two individuals, did campus officials take the right action in closing down the campus and confining students to their rooms? The failure to communicate beyond the abbreviated message on the alarm system created uncertainty. As Ulmer, Sellnow, and Seeger (2007) indicate the threat of crisis is perceptual. The lack of information and rumors may have created more concerns among students than necessary. This failure to communicate adequately served as a “distraction” and may have created more uncertainty.

While in this situation as in most crises, the facts were murky and ambiguity existed, not enough information was given to stakeholders to help them in their own decision making nor to allow them to take precautions to protect themselves. The actions of university officials may have in fact inhibited relationship building. While listening to stakeholders may not be feasible in this kind of crisis, face-to-face communication as proposed by Holder (2004) is still important in “softening” the blow of the crisis. Not only were students left uninformed but they potentially could have been traumatized by the blaring repetition of the “active shooter” alarm. In locking down a campus for whatever reason, it is important that university resources be used to communicate more effectively, beyond the use of technical means, on a more personal face-to-face basis. Residence staff, student assistants, and faculty could be trained and used to provide this personal communication.

A crisis narrative as proposed by Heath (2004) was used to describe the 2007 shooting at Northwest Missouri State University. The narrative provided a means of learning from the incident and a way of recommending future action. This story shows that narrative can be used effectively to study crisis situations. The narrative also becomes a part of the cultural history of the institution. As the story is retold it takes on a life of its own.

REFERENCES

- “Blunt commends University's response to gunfire.” (2007, Nov. 6). Northwest Missouri State University News Release. <http://www.nwmissouri.edu/universityrelations/news/newsreleases/071106govreport.htm>
- Chun, H. (2009). Enhancing internal communications in the event of a crisis at an institution of higher education. *Business Research Yearbook* , 615-619.
- Heath, R.L. (2004). “Telling a story: A narrative approach to communication during a crisis.” in D.P. Millar and R.L Heath, eds. *Responding to crisis: A rhetorical approach to crisis communication*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, (pp. 167-188).

Holder, T.L. (2004). "Constructing response during uncertainty: Organizing for crisis" in D.P. Millar and R.L. Heath, eds. *Responding to crisis: A rhetorical approach to crisis communication*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, (pp. 63-74).

"Hubbard comments on University gunfire." (2007, Oct. 30). Northwest Missourian. <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7ZBjJ86-O8s>>

"Northwest introduces emergency text system." (2008, June 17) Northwest Missouri State University News Release. <http://www.nwmissouri.edu/UniversityRelations/NEWS/newsreleases/080617alert.htm>

"Person of interest." (2007, Oct. 30). The Kansas City Star. http://www.accessmylibrary.com/coms2/summary_0286-33313389_ITM

"Security and Emergency Checklist." (2008, updated). Northwest Missouri State University.

Sellnow, T.L. and R.R. Ulmer. (2004). "Ambiguity as an inherent factor in organizational crisis communication." in D.P. Millar and R.L. Heath, eds. *Responding to crisis: A rhetorical approach to crisis communication*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, (pp. 251-262).

"Shots Fired At Missouri University: Incident Leads To Lockdown" (2007, October 28). KCTV News. <http://www.kctv5.com/news/14441951/detail.html>

Ulmer, R.R., T. L. Sellnow, M.W. Seeger. (2007). *Effective crisis communication: Moving from crisis to opportunity*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.